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Author Chris Crutcher: Speaking Out on Teachers' Role in Aiding Children of Trauma

Lori Goodson

With our theme this issue of “Dear Teacher: Children and Trauma,” it seems appropriate that we have a conversation with Chris Crutcher—one of the leading young adult authors whose subject matter often deals with adolescents’ trauma.

His journey began as a teacher, before becoming director of Lakeside School, an alternative school in Oakland, Calif., during the 1970s. Crutcher then shifted to Spokane Community Health Center and Child Protection as a therapist—a role that would develop the foundation for his future novels’ realistic adolescent characters who struggled through some of life’s bleakest moments. Along the way, he became an incredibly powerful voice and advocate for struggling students.

He is recognized today for his unique characters in numerous novels, as well as his short stories that appear in various young adult collections. His website, <http://www.chriscrutcher.com>,

proudly labels him “Author & Loudmouth,” and he’s earned the title with books that treat adolescents’ issues with candor and bluntness.

Years ago, my daughter was a sixth-grader who had decided she would spend her summer reading banned books. As it happened, Crutcher was in town for a visit with teachers from the Flint Hills Writing Project, the Kansas State University site of the National Writing Project, and my daughter tagged along with her father to an informal luncheon with Crutcher. Sitting a few chairs away from him, surrounded by adults, she had been oblivious to the discussion, then looked up, recognizing Crutcher and matter-of-factly commented, “Wow...I’m reading a lot of your books this summer.”

And, while his reputation has been made as someone who doesn’t hesitate to rock the boat, he’s rocking it in a good way—providing realistic stories about adolescents, standing up for injustices, and battling censorship. Along the way, he has won national award after national award for engaging books that help rock the boat—and get readers to really see what teens are dealing with. As a therapist, he knows the stories all too well...and he’s using adolescent literature to make sure others have a better picture of the trauma young people are facing.

So many of Crutcher’s works focus on adolescents’ trauma, as he shares their journeys through some harsh and painful events. His young adult novels show the intricate workings of an adolescent’s life—where the negatives often outweigh the positives and where the trauma seems such a heavy burden for the adolescent to bear.

“For a long time I’ve had this sense that if you want to see how something works, look at it broken,” Crutcher says. “And while ‘broken’ isn’t necessarily the most exact term for what happens in response to trauma, the point is a fair one.

“I grew up buying into the narrative of the 1950s perfect family—the one with a house and a picket fence and a dog or cat and a mom and dad who loved each other and stayed together and took care of their kids,” he says. “I bought into it in the face of massive evidence to the contrary. But we all lied and we stayed out of each other’s business and rolled along.”

But his experiences teaching shattered that as he realized the reality of many students’ lives.

“When I started teaching and then directing in an alternative school in Oakland, CA, I realized I was working with kids from families so conflicted and compromised that they couldn’t contain their secrets. My eyes were opened even wider when I came back to the Northwest and began doing therapy with families so chaotic that kids had been removed for their protection.

“I began seeing coping skills and survival tactics I couldn’t have imagined, from both kids and parents, and my entire idea of a ‘hero’ changed. There’s a line in one of my short stories in which a mentor to the protagonist tells him that Superman isn’t brave. He isn’t brave because he’s bulletproof, which means his good works come at no risk. It’s those who are vulnerable, and stand up anyway who are the heroes.”

“That all came from a profound sense building inside me that for those who don’t fold, a life-arc of hard times can produce amazing grace...along with the sense that, in almost every instance, there but for the grace of chance, go I. I guess that turned my writing career into an exploration of...for lack of a better term...possibilities.”

As an individual with many titles—author, teacher, therapist, advocate for child protection, he sees those roles as simply offshoots of each other, with the primary focus of helping children.

“Actually, to me they’re all one role,” he says. “I mean, if you’re not an advocate for protecting kids, what the hell good are you? Another word for *therapy* is *help*, and I have probably done as much good outside my office as in. The ability to help mostly requires trust, connection and relationship. Most people don’t need the magic that doesn’t really come with therapy anyway. They need a witness; someone to listen and not judge, then to care enough to walk some distance together toward empowerment. Add content to that, and you have a good teacher. Tell it on paper (or these days, electronically), and you have an author. The roles have always merged. I just needed to live long enough to recognize it. And I should also say I’ve been on the receiving end of all that, as much as on the delivery end.”

Reviewers heap praise upon Crutcher’s books for their realistic portrayal of adolescents’ lives. Yet, those same books are often lightning rods for censorship. It’s an interesting merging of positive and negative responses.

“I think it speaks to the depth of the divisions in our society regarding free expression as protected by the First Amendment, and our disagreements about teenagers’ capabilities of making their own tough decisions,” he says. “Easily 90 percent of the struggles I have over censorship come from the religious/political right. Their overriding philosophy is that kids aren’t mature enough to decide what to read or not read and that *they* are. They seem to think if they can control what goes into a kid’s brain, they can control how that kid sees the world.

“That kind of control, of course, is impossible,” he says. “When entering into that discussion, I always agree that they have a right to decide for their own children (good luck with that), but not for everyone’s children. In general that’s the classic censorship battle.

“But I look back into my own history and get a little befuddled. See, my father was a classic conservative of his time. By the time he was the same age I was when I graduated from college, he had flown 35 missions over Germany as a World War II pilot of a B-17 bomber. He came back home a *patriot*; and was a voracious reader and political activist. If you ran for any office as a conservative, from dog catcher to President of the United States, my old man was your campaign manager in Valley County, Idaho. And he would have run a nail through his eye before allowing a book to get banned. He thought he had fought a war over that. He believed totally in separation of church and state, for the good of the church *and* the state. The two things had different purposes for our culture.”

But today’s environment is causing some deep and severe lines drawn regarding the topic.

“In those times this censorship issue could be discussed civilly, but we have become so divided that civility is barely possible,” Crutcher says. “I’ve been called a danger to our youth, an agent

of the devil (once someone actually called me *the* devil, which made me kind of proud...being tired of playing second fiddle) and even worse. No way am I alone in that. Walter Dean Myers, Laurie Halse Anderson, Sherman Alexie, Lois Lowry, to name only a few, have heard far worse. Judy Blume was a true lightning rod for it long before I ever came on the scene. And again, I think it speaks to deep divisions in our society and some fundamental ignorance of the purpose and meaning of the First Amendment.”

Crutcher has a depth of experience working with adolescents dealing with trauma, yet he avoids pinpointing specific messages that his readers should reap from his novels; yet he hopes there’s an overarching theme to all of his works.

“I don’t know that I have a “message” per se,” he says. “Almost any fiction writer will tell you that if you start out with a message, you’re likely to write a story that either won’t get published or one you will wish hadn’t. However, if you tell your story well, messages will rise. What the reader takes from that message might be very different than the one you intended, because of the history that reader brings to the reading. So in my mind, my “message” is whatever you get, though I’d be lying if I didn’t think that only certain messages are available.

“The message I would put out in real life would be pretty simple: we’re responsible for everything we do,” Crutcher says. “We can’t control what happens, but we can control how we respond to what happens. I want every person I care about to find his or her way to empowerment, whatever that means to them. I know I’m answering this question backward, but in terms of what today’s adolescents are going through.... Whew!

“The world is moving fast and the *amount* of information available is, to an old guy like me, staggering. Kids are being asked to make decisions there is no way they have enough information to make. For so many of them, some of the jobs they will be doing aren’t even jobs yet, and moral decisions that are to be made, are to them at this juncture, vague. Anyone who isn’t concerned with the environment is closing his/her eyes to the most important issue of their existence. Many of their moral and ethical decisions will be tied to that.”

Education—and especially information—are key to their future, especially when it comes to moving beyond any traumatic environments.

“When I was a teenager, I felt I had the luxury of putting true education off, that it wasn’t important for me to *know* as much as I could know,” Crutcher says. “For kids today, gathering information and the skills to gather information may be the most urgent thing they face. And yet, they’re developing in the same way, at pretty much the same speed, as were we. The pressing personal issues are the same as they were for us. What do I do about the powerful biology churning within me? Who should I be with? Who should I listen to? How to I become my own person when I’m so fearful of embarrassment? The stories I write touch on those things, and for the most part I try to leave them open-ended enough that readers will find the message they need. It’s a full plate.”

For several decades, this award-winning author has made a point to visit various schools across the nation, sitting with students, visiting with them, and really listening to their stories and their

concerns. And, equally, they share what they want adults in their world to know about them. Quite simply, they want *their* stories recognized.

“They want to be heard,” Crutcher says. “They want to be seen. They might not use the word, but they want *empowerment*, that magic element that gives us influence over what happens next. I think the messages coming from the students after the Marjorie Stoneman-Douglas shooting in Parkland, FL, are particularly salient, in that they’re so well-articulated, and, of course, they’re supercharged because of the intensity of the situation. Kids want us to know what their lives are like, and they want us to stop minimizing their challenges.”

Those who have one of the clearest perspectives to their challenges are the classroom teachers—the individuals who provide a safe learning environment for approximately eight hours a day. Besides those adults at home, teachers often are at the forefront in dealing with students who have faced or are facing trauma. Not only do they need to help their students through these difficult times, but they have to find a balance between the struggles their students face and their role in helping them learn the classroom content.

“They do have to pay attention to content,” Crutcher says. “Knowledge is power. But that is never exclusive of making their classrooms safe for all students. I was never as strong on content as I should have been when I was a teacher, but the one thing I always aimed for was to make my classroom safe for the most vulnerable students. That required super-vigilance on my part. I know I wasn’t always successful, and I could detail some awful consequences when I fell down in that area, but it was the one thing I could do to make the content of my classes more meaningful. Teachers need to understand the nuances of bullying, and they need to attend to the bullies, as well as the bullied. Those kids are very often one in the same.”

The challenge, then, becomes having knowledgeable teachers who can deal with the social-emotional side of the students, as well as the intellectual. He calls for teacher preparation programs to help new teachers be more prepared for the difficult reality of some of their students’ lives.

“I think teacher preparation programs need to spend a lot more time on the *make-up* of different classrooms their new teachers will encounter,” Crutcher says. “For many years I presented to teachers-to-be in the English Ed. program at Eastern Washington University and was taken aback, for lack of a better term, at how surprised they were when I talked about some of the kids who were models for the characters in my books, and who would also be in their classrooms. It was always a sobering experience for them to think there would be kids in their classrooms with horrific pasts that they, as teachers, would never know the details of, yet would be charged to protect.

“It’s possible,” he says, “we spend too much time on methods and evaluation and not enough on relationship. If you’re a teacher, you may be the one adult in some kid’s life who holds the tether for them. Teacher prep programs need to identify that tether and need to give their students as many relationship strategies as traditional teaching strategies.

On the other side of that, some teachers themselves have endured trauma as adolescents, which can mean that be a positive or a negative in helping their own students heal.

“...*sometimes* an effect of trauma is to dull our responses to others who have suffered that same, or similar trauma,” he says. “There can be a sense of... ‘I survived it and it wasn’t that bad,’ when in fact it *was* that bad, but our coping skills tell us differently. As adults we have to step outside our own experience and *believe* the research.

“My most valuable experience as a therapist was to work with an early childhood specialist who worked with kids who had been through, or were currently going through, major trauma,” he says. “As I watched her do her work, she would literally *disappear*, and I was able to see the world through that child’s eyes. Over time I realized that was what I needed to do with adolescents and adults. Our perception is reality, and when we’re working with troubled souls, we need to believe and accept their reality. That isn’t to say they always tell the truth or that their depiction of their situation is accurate in literal terms, but the longer we work with someone and the more we witness their behaviors, the better equipped we are to see the effects of their experiences.”

Crutcher encourages teachers to take on the challenge of serving students who are dealing with trauma.

“...as educators who work with kids of any age, we have to be brave; maybe more now than ever,” he says. “The teaching profession is probably one of the most overworked, underpaid—and often underappreciated—professions in our culture, particularly for those dedicated to doing it right. Given that, it should at least be fun. But in many instances, fearful parents, administrators who pander to the public before supporting their teachers and students, and politicians who would rather create favorable statistics than truly educated students, threaten to destroy the beauty of the teaching profession. Recently (at this writing) teachers in Oklahoma and Arizona, to name two, have taken to the streets to force legislators to at least pay a living wage, and to a degree, it’s working.

“We may have to resort to measures such as these to wake the public up to the fact that accessing students to their own creativity is far more important than simply measuring their memories.”

Crutcher’s works are banned often because they approach realistic topics that people would rather not be forced to face. But it may be those novels, coupled with his voice regarding teaching students of trauma, push educators to a deeper level of support for those students.